

# Hawaii no ka oi\* in terms of health care

Richard V Stenson\*\*

*The author uses an original survey of Hawaii residents and published international survey data to demonstrate that Hawaii consumers are far more satisfied than their U.S. mainland, Canadian, and British counterparts with their health care system and find it one of the least of their problems of living in paradise.*

## Introduction

There is a great deal in the press about the cost, accessibility, and even the structure of our health care system in these waning days of an election year. To be sure, the growing problems of the medically indigent as well as the escalating health care costs must continue to be addressed in many of the other 49 states. Nevertheless, those working in Hawaii's health care sector agree that the seriousness of the problem with the medical care system here is being overplayed by politicians (and would-be politicians). It doesn't require "rocket" science to see that health care is an easy target for concern by the general public, given the significant percent of the economy required to provide high quality, modern medical care as compared with the relatively few votes that may be cast by medical professionals. As we shall see below, the cost and availability of medical care are ranked as lesser problems among other issues of concern by the general population in Hawaii. We explored what consumers really think about the health care system in our state, and how they rank it versus other problems.

## Methods

At the direction of the author, the Honolulu-based market research firm, OmniTrak, completed a random telephone survey of 508 Oahu households in November 1991. The survey included questions on Hawaii health care services, their cost, accessibility, and the relative impact of these versus other perceived issues of public concern. Households included in the survey were regular, non-military residents; those households with individuals employed in the health care field were excluded. The survey findings have a +/- 4% error rate at a 95% confidence level.

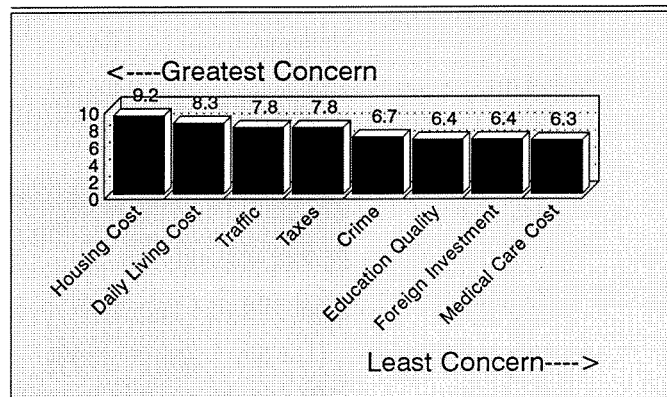
Respondents also were asked whether they felt our health care system "needed fundamental changes" or "works pretty well and needs only minor changes." The responses to this question are compared with the findings of a similar 1988 poll conducted by the Louis Harris organization in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. The results of this Hawaii survey may be surprising to the general

\* "Is the best"

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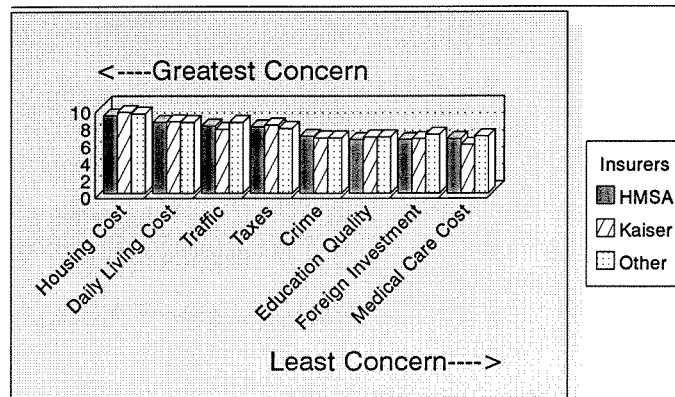
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Graph 1. Problems Hawaii's People Face (Overall Rankings)



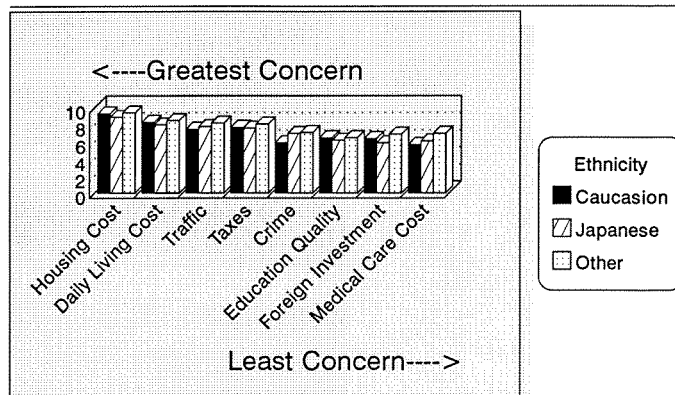
OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

Graph 2. Problems Hawaii's People Face (By Health Insurance Carrier)



OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

Graph 3. Problems Hawaii's People Face (By Ethnicity)



OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

public and policy-makers, but are much less so to those involved in the delivery of health services here. The survey indicates that Hawaii residents think better of their health care system by a margin of nearly 3 to 1 compared to the U.S. as a whole. Hawaii ratings are also significantly more positive than that of Canadians who rated their system.

Household survey question number one: *"On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the greatest problem people face in living in Hawaii and 1 being the least serious problem, how would you rate the following choices: Quality of public school education; foreign investment; cost of housing; taxes; cost of daily living; crime; cost and availability of medical care; traffic?"*

Respondents also were asked if there were any other major problems with living in Hawaii. Although other issues were raised on this open-ended section of the survey, the additional concerns did not produce any items of statistical significance and those responses are not included in this article.

### Results in Hawaii

Graphs 1 through 6 depict the results of the first question broken out for different variables of possible interest.

**Graph 1** depicts the overall response to the first question. It indicates that the cost of housing is by far the greatest perceived problem, followed closely by the general cost of living, traffic, and taxes, as major problems of living in Hawaii. The cost and availability of medical care is generally the least of the problems facing residents.

**Graph 2** shows the same comparison broken down by the respondent's insurance carrier. The results are essentially the same as Graph 1, but it should be noted that those with a Kaiser Permanente health plan are least concerned about health care costs, followed by HMSA plan members (Hawaii Medical Service Association, the Hawaii Blue Shield and Blue Cross affiliate), and those with other types of insurance having the greatest concern in this category. HMSA and Kaiser provide over two-thirds of all health insurance coverage in Hawaii and, therefore, are identified separately here. The "other" category is comprised of Medicare, Medicaid, CHAMPUS, Hawaii Dental Service (medical plan), and smaller insurance groups.

**Graph 3** breaks out the responses by the ethnicity of the respondents. Residents who are Caucasian or Japanese comprise approximately two-thirds of the population. The "other" category is everyone else: native Hawaiian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, other Polynesian and Asian groups, etc. The survey found that Caucasians and Japanese had less concern about many issues, including the cost and availability of health care (both were below the 6.3 overall rating on

Graph 1). However, other ethnic groups scored health care costs slightly higher than the total on Graph 1.

**Graph 4** breaks out responses by household income. Not surprisingly, those making \$50,000 or more a year are slightly less concerned about most issues. Compared to those households with lower incomes, this group is most notably less concerned with crime, quality of education, foreign investment, and the cost and availability of health care. Households in both the under \$35,000 and the \$35,000 to \$49,000 a year groups appear to have responded about the same on most items.

(Continued on page 276) ►

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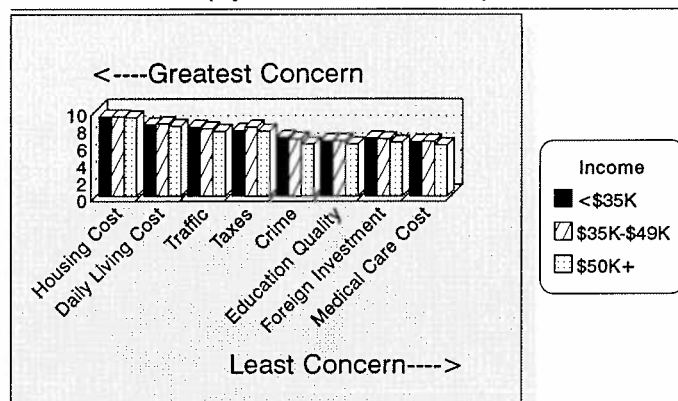


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**Graph 5** breaks out responses by gender of respondent. Women appear to be more concerned on all issues. We'll leave analysis of this finding for the social scientists to ponder.

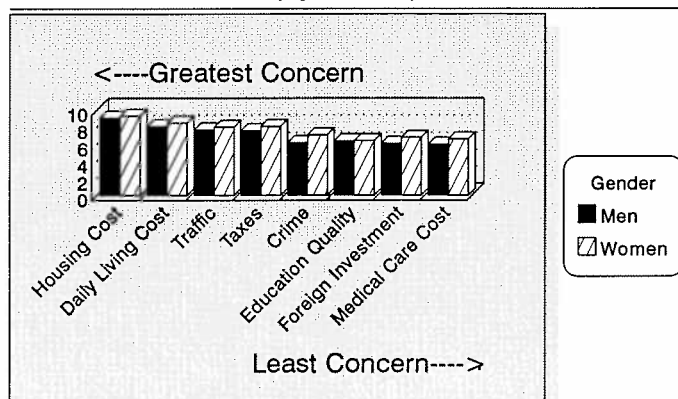
**Graph 6** breaks out responses by area of residence. Although the trends are generally the same as in the overall ratings, it is noteworthy that those who live in Waianae indicated a relatively high level of concern on nearly every problem.

**Graph 4. Problems Hawaii's People Face (By Household Income)**



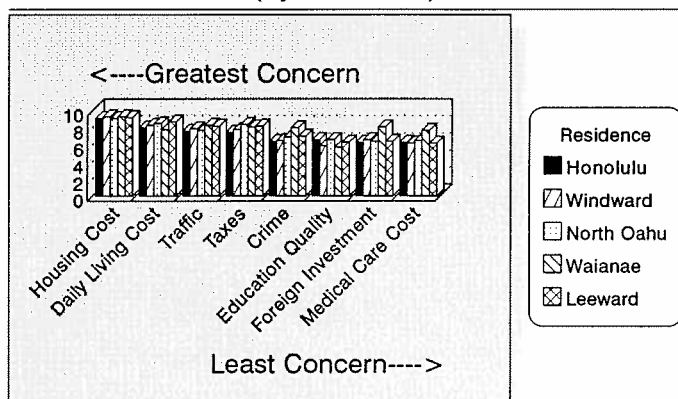
OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

**Graph 5. Problems Hawaii's People Face (By Gender)**



OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

**Graph 6. Problems Hawaii's People Face (By Residence)**

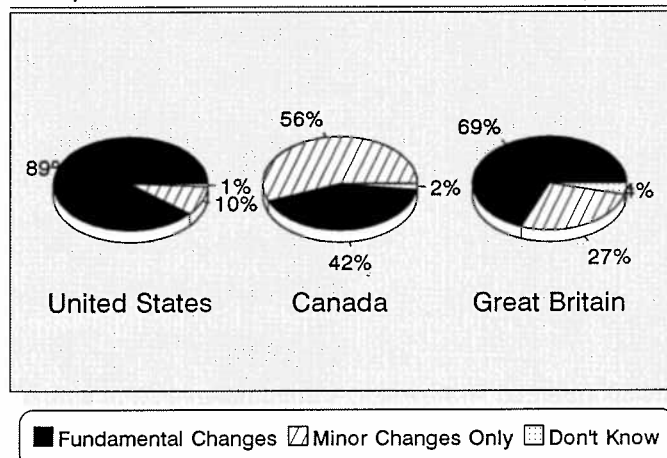


OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

## A Comparison

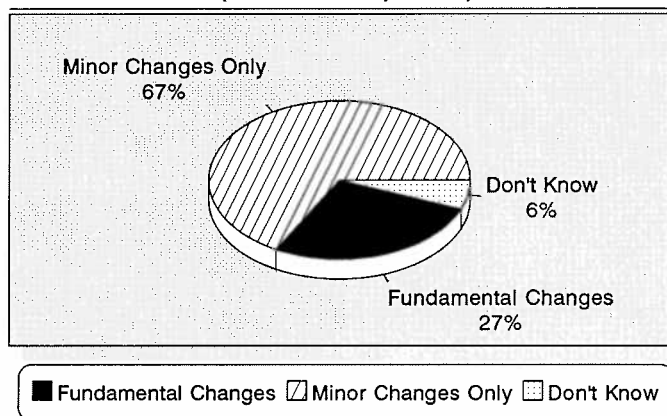
Graphs 7, 8, and 9 deal with responses and comparisons for the second household survey question: "When you think about how easy or difficult it is in Hawaii to get health care services you or your family need, and how easy or difficult it is to have insurance coverage, which of the following statements would best describe how you feel about Hawaii's health care system: A) it

**Graph 7. Three Nations Rate Their Own Health Systems**



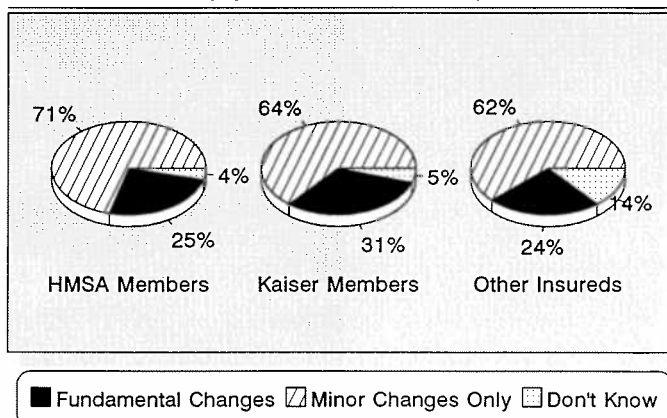
Harris Poll; R.J. Blendon, Health Management Quarterly, First Quarter 1989

**Graph 8. Residents Rate Hawaii's Health System (Overall Response)**



OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

**Graph 9. Residents Rate Hawaii's Health System (By Insurance Carrier)**



OmniTrak Poll; R.V. Stenson, November 1991

needs fundamental change or complete rebuilding, B) it needs only minor changes, or C) don't know?"

**Graph 7.** In 1988 the journal *Health Management Quarterly* asked Louis Harris Associates and the Harvard School of Public Health to survey Americans, Canadians, and Britons about whether they thought their health care system needed fundamental changes, minor changes, or weren't sure. Those results, as reproduced in Graph 7, were published by Robert J. Blendon in the first quarter (1989) issue of *HMQ*<sup>1</sup> and have been widely quoted and referenced since then. Graph 7 shows that nearly 90% of Americans are generally fed-up with their health care system as compared to nearly 70% of Britons, while fewer than 50% of Canadians feel that way.

**Graph 8** displays the November 1991 OmniTrak survey responses to the same question put to Hawaii residents. Only slightly more than one in four Hawaii residents (27%) feel our health care system needs fundamental change or overhaul. Hawaii's 1974 Prepaid Health Care Act, requiring businesses to provide health insurance to all employees working 20 hours or more a week, has likely been a major factor in this relatively favorable response. Additionally, the author postulates that this positive public sentiment also may have resulted from Hawaii's health care providers accepting their community responsibility to provide medical care for all, regardless of ability to pay.

**Graph 9** breaks out the Hawaii responses to the second question, by insurance coverage. The trend is generally the same. However, those with Kaiser Health Care Plan appear to be significantly more in favor of fundamental changes to the health system than HMSA or "other" insureds.

### Discussion

We have reported in the January 1992 issue of *Hawaii Medical Journal* that Hawaii's percent of gross product spent on health care is lower than the U.S. average and also lower than that of most countries with purportedly superior, socialized medicine systems<sup>2</sup>. The findings of the current OmniTrak survey and their comparison with those of the 1989 Harris/Harvard international poll can be argued to make a further point that, despite paying less of their gross product for health care (or, perhaps because they do pay less), Hawaii's residents perceive their health care system more positively than do the residents of the mainland U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. And, Hawaii residents feel that access to and cost of their health care system is generally the least of the major problems they face in struggling to live in paradise. Perhaps we would better serve our community by redoubling our public policy efforts at tackling the clearly greater problems of the cost of

housing, cost of living, traffic, taxes, crime, and quality of education before tinkering with a health care system that Hawaii residents feel is working pretty well.

### REFERENCES

1. Blendon RJ. Three systems: a comparative view. *Health Manage Q.* 1989 1st Quarter;11(1):2-10.
2. Stenson RV. Comparison of health expenditures in the U.S. and Hawaii economies. *Hawaii Medical Journal.* January 1992;51(1):10-14.

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